

The people of Montagu
welcome you, our honoured President

Nelson Mandela

on the occasion of the MUSCADEL Festival
and one hundred years of
Municipal status

We confirm our loyalty to you
and support your ideals
of one unified, free and democratic
South Africa

May you continue to lead us
with your great wisdom
and inspired leadership

May God guide and bless you



W. J. S. J. S. J.
MAYOR

S. J. S. J. S. J.
DEPUTY MAYOR

P. J. S. J.
TOWN CLERK

28 APRIL 1995

Introduction: David Parker told this story and supplied the pictures. David and wife Cynthia ran a very successful business called Cynthia's Cottages for many years in Montagu West. They relocated to the UK in 2019 but still retain property in Montagu West and are regular visitors to Montagu.



David and Cynthia

Mandela's visit to Montagu

(submitted by Don Woodford)

In the early 1990s, Montagu was beginning to claw its way back from the debilitating financial depression it had been experiencing since the serious flood of 1981. The entire Montagu Hot Springs complex and hotel had been destroyed, and it took years to restore them. The road into Montagu from Ashton had become impassable - two of the bridges had gone and drivers had to use the old Bain's road built in 1873. During that time many people simply gave up visiting; things were grim, Montagu had simply gone off the radar as a place to visit.

However, a decade or so later, a few people who could see Montagu's potential moved here. Establishments like the Mimosa Hotel were brought back to life, the Montagu Country Hotel was upgraded, people like us were starting up tourist accommodation and there was considerable emphasis on trying to promote the town. A chamber of commerce was already in existence, but we formed an independent tourism group whose members were essentially involved in that industry. In fact, we had only one "business" member on the committee, the pharmacy.

Let's invite the president

Our group had already revived the Montagu Muscadel Festival. It was a harvest festival in those days, and held in April. In October 1994, we were planning the April 1995 festival: brainstorming a theme for the event. Oliver Devoy from Kingna Lodge, who was our chairman and at the time, threw his suggestion into the hat, "Why don't we invite the president?" Of course, that idea met with considerable laughter and ridicule, but Oliver stuck to his guns, "Well, if you don't ask you don't get," he retorted. Thus, we agreed to write to the president. I drafted the letter; it was signed by Reggie Boesak, Chief of the Hessequa Tribe, who was on the committee at that time, and whose name we thought carried more gravitas; and it was sent off. We never heard a thing, so we just carried on preparing for the April festival and forgot about our mad idea.

Be careful what you wish for!

Just two or three weeks before the event we were shocked to receive confirmation that the president would be delighted to attend the Muscadel Festival. The news was met with major panic on our part: what would be expected of us; what would we have to do? Fortunately, the presidential staff calmed our nerves; "You don't have to do anything, we will send all the

appropriate people.” Operational and security staff arrived, went through our plans with a fine-tooth comb and made all the transport, press and security arrangements. All we had to do was write an official welcome, invite important members of the Montagu community to the event, find a helicopter pad and organise a venue.

President Mandela would arrive at the only helicopter pad in Montagu - at the hospital – and, since Oliver had put forward the idea in the first place, the venue we decided on was Kingna Lodge. Kingna had a large area at the back beside the pool which would “house” the gathering of community representatives and a small stage for Mandela to stand on to address them.

Diversions and detours

The great day dawned. We saw the helicopter arrive and then turn up towards the hospital. Mandela's team had arranged to borrow two or three Mercedes cars from local farmers for the use of the presidential party. Mandela was supposed to alight from the helicopter, get into a car and be driven straight to Kingna Lodge. This did not happen. I was waiting on the stoep of Kingna Lodge with television crews and newspaper reporters. I had been appointed official photographer and my job was to capture what we wanted for our records. Time went by. Oliver Devoy's grandmother, a delightful, white haired Irish lady was standing with Cynthia, my wife, and she whispered, “I've got to go to the toilet.” This meant walking back into the lodge down to the far end. Cynthia said, “What happens if Mandela arrives?” Fortunately, that didn't transpire; we got granny back safely. Everyone was looking at their watch. Security people were on their radios. Where on earth was Mandela?

Mandela had taken a detour! As he got out of the helicopter, he had asked what the building was and when he was told it was a hospital, decided to make an impromptu visit. Dulcie Weingarten, who ran the crèche at Ashbury, was in the hospital at the time and told me that Mandela went round the beds speaking to patients and spent time meeting the totally amazed and unprepared staff. Only then did he drive to Kingna Lodge.



At Kingna Lodge he was supposed to get out of the car, walk up the steps and go through to the back where the invited guests were waiting to greet him. However, the first thing he did was to talk to two Kingna Lodge staff and an older lady with her grandson, Christian, who had been allowed to stand and peep around the corner to see him arrive. Mandela walked straight across and spent several minutes talking to them. He was then making his way up the steps when, unscheduled, a small girl ran out of the crowd and up to him with a bunch of what looked like dead flowers. He stopped and had a few words with her. She was the granddaughter of Eldrid Polikoff and had been visiting that weekend. She was called back and was photographed (with the president and her flowers) on the stoep.



Arrival and address at Kingna Lodge



Eventually, President Mandela made it to the back of Kingna Lodge where a cross-section of the Montagu community was waiting for him. I had approached Sylvia Krige about what we might give him as a memento of his visit and she had kindly donated one her husband Francois Krige's paintings, which was also waiting for the president - on an easel with a cloth over it.



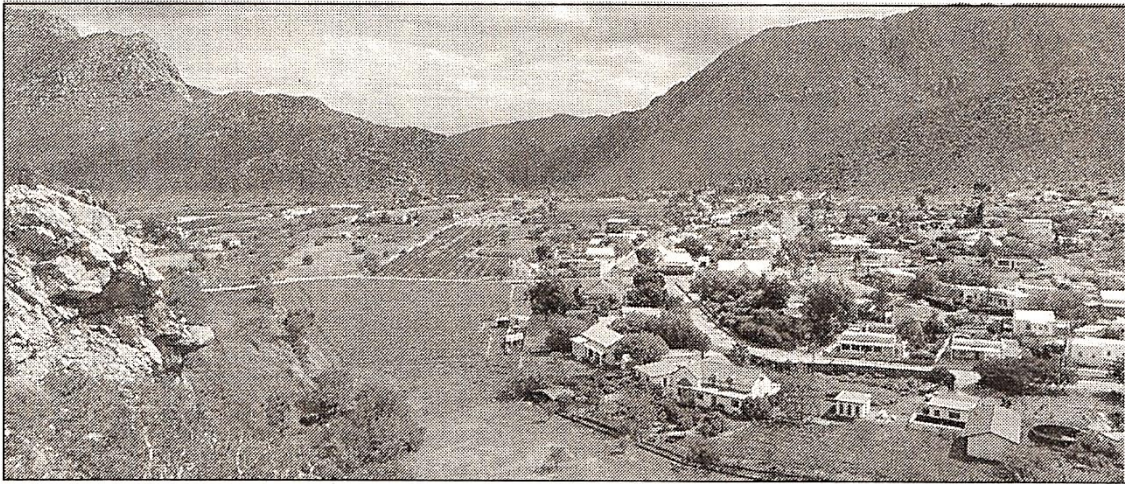
Mr. Mandela, the Krige painting and Reggie Boesak, Chief of the Hessequa Tribe

Mandela spoke to the group: it was his first return to the Cape since leaving Robben Island and the security people were a bit nervous about how he would be received. The speech ended and then Breyten Breytenbach and Van Zyl Slabbert, who had been very supportive of the African National Congress (ANC) in the past, stepped out of the crowd and walked up to Mandela. In my photograph, he is seen hugging them; a totally spontaneous gesture. There were tears when they greeted each other: it had been a long time. The president mingled with the crowd and shook hands for some time, but he now needed a break. Kingna Lodge had reserved a room for him to rest in if he wanted to and he had time to relax and perhaps have a few private words with Breytenbach and Slabbert.



The Muscadel Festival

We then got on with the Muscadel Festival itself. The focal point was the bottom end of Kohler Street, where it joins Long Street. We had erected a stage across the road and had planned that the vehicle carrying Mandela would arrive at the back, on Long Street, from where he could safely access the podium and address the crowd. I got here early because I had to position myself between the crowd barrier and the stage to take photographs. Already, there was a seething mass of people all the way up Kohler Street to Bath Street and beyond. We had not known what sort of public reaction there would be, but farmers brought their workers in from distant places and much of the population of Montagu and surrounds was there. As Mandela came onto the stage, everyone surged forward to see him. The barrier was quite flimsy and I was trapped in the middle. Reggie Boesak, who was on the stage, grabbed a microphone, spoke to the crowd and, fortunately for me, they took notice and held back.



Die pragtige dorp Montagu, voorheen bekend as "Achter de Cogmanskloof" is in vrugbare landbougebied langs die Bad- en Kingnarivier.

President open Muskadelfees

'N hoogepunt van vanjaar se Muskadelfees op Montagu, is die amptelike opening Vrydag deur President Nelson Mandela. Die voorlopige tyd van die openingsrede is 11.30 vm.

Die fees begin vandag en loop Saterdagagaand ten einde met 'n program propvol pret en opwindende vir die hele gesin.

Vanaand om 7 nm. bied die vyf plaaslike skole 'n musiekfees aan in die gemeenskapsaal op Montagu. Toegang is gratis.

Oormore behoort aan gholfspelers, met die aanbieding van 'n

vierbalkompetisie geborg deur Kingna Lodge.

Voor die amptelike opening Vrydag beweeg die feesoptog deur die strate van die dorp.

Vroegaand, van 6- tot 7.30 nm. op die skemerkelkie vir die borge by Montagu Garden Inn word die kandidate vir die Mej. Muskadelkompetisie beoordeel en om 9.30 begin die feesbal in die saal van die Montagu Junior Skool, waar die feeskoningin en haar prinsesse aangewys word.

Saterdag begin die verrigtinge met die Muskadel Halfmarathon

en 'n pretdraf van 5 kilometer. Hardlopers sal omstreeks 7 vm. wegspring.

Om 10 vm. open die wyntuin, waar pret, vermaak en musiek deurlopend aan die orde sal wees met talle van die land se gewilde kunstenaars.

Die feesspyskaart van kos en pret sluit in die biefstuktuin, ritte op vierwielmotorfietse, 'n meganiese rodeo, 'n springkasteel, 'n groot verskeidenheid kuns- en handwerkstalletjies en disse uit talle kosstalletjies. Wyn kan ook geproe word.

A security nightmare

President Mandela then addressed the crowd. That really was all he was supposed to do – make his speech, turn, wave goodbye, leave the stage, get into the Mercedes, drive back to the helipad and go. However, an ANC member from the Cape was standing alongside him and said Mandela now wanted to walk through the crowd. Presidential staff said, "No!" The risks were enormous, but that is what Mandela wanted to do and what he did. It was a blazing hot day and somebody produced an umbrella. Mandela got down from the stage, we moved the barrier for him and he just walked up Kohler Street. You couldn't see him; all you could see was the umbrella moving up the street. He was totally encircled by people, doing his thing, shaking hands, greeting everyone. His security people did not know what to do. They

had not planned to pick him up at the top end of Kohler Street and now had to grab the car quickly, race round and wait for him to “pop out” in his own time. When Mandela eventually appeared, his vehicle was ready and he was driven off to the helicopter.



The black umbrella can be seen in the middle of the crowd

Montagu on the map

The visit to Montagu took place virtually a year after President Mandela’s inauguration and it was his first non-political event. The fact that he had come to Montagu put us on the map for a while. Not long afterwards FW de Klerk stayed in Montagu, but it was a private event, not an official visit. There were also one or two visits from important members of the ANC. Then life went back to normal.

I will never forget President Mandela’s visit. It was a wonderful experience to hear him speak and see somebody of his stature who was more interested in chatting to ordinary people than talking political shop.

Twenty years later

In 2015, Peter Dearlove, the then editor of the Montagu Mail, planned to publish a 20th anniversary edition marking Mandela's visit. We managed to trace and photograph the 'little girl' who had presented Mandela with the dead flowers. Now, years later, she was a twenty something year old with a PhD in dentistry. I went into my archives, but of course in the pre-electronic era the photos were on film. We took the film to Robertson to have it developed but the laboratory did not have the equipment to process it. However, they agreed to scan the photos from the film. I gave the whole set to Peter; he picked the pictures that were published in that edition of the Mail. I still have the roll of 35mm film stored in a filing cabinet out of direct light.

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Contributions: Amanda du Plessis for recording the story David Parker told Don Woodford and placing in an electronic format